



The Festival Experience

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WHETHER THE EXPERIENCE of attending and speaking at a festival is a joy or a misery can depend on much more than the fee (or lack of one). Some provide accommodation, expenses, a volunteer to show you around and a free pass to other events, making you feel welcome and valued. However, some do none of these things, apparently under the impression that writers can survive on the thin air of a prestigious invitation. No wonder that the Society of Authors has felt it necessary to point out that festivals, which are making a clear profit through charging for tickets, have a duty to pass on a reasonable fee to the writer, without whom the whole edifice would tumble.

Over the years there have been pleasant surprises: being asked to open a new festival as the first speaker; invitations to festival parties and the opportunity to meet writers I admire, visiting interesting venues in chapels, theatres and stately homes as well as the more traditional libraries and bookshops. On the other hand, I've also had to cart boxes of books in the rain across a waterlogged field to a tent no audience was ever going to find. On another occasion the venue was a crypt. (This may sound romantic but was actually dark, freezing and smelt of mildew.)

In terms of audience, like Forrest Gump's box of chocolates, you never know what you're going to get. On one occasion around eighty people were seated in a large marquee and the stock of books sold out, on another there was an audience of only six and three of those present turned out to be the librarians who had organised it.



However, there are pleasures in attending festivals that have nothing to do with publicity, or even with making a living, but are all about novel experiences. A thoroughly enjoyable event for my World War One novel was based around a period afternoon tea, complete with posters, bunting and wartime recipes and with the question and answer session occurring speed-dating style as I moved around the tables. I was very grateful for the ingenuity and imagination with which the organisers showcased the book. Running festival workshops at historic houses gave me access to wonderful material such as an Elizabethan aristocrat's tiny costume of black velvet, with seed-pearl buttons, and a room painted with secret masonic symbols. A gig at Ledbury Poetry festival introduced me to my first ever poetry slam: a rowdy, foot stomping celebration of the spoken word that I wouldn't have missed for the world. The writing life is solitary at times and festivals provide an antidote to too much isolation and a welcome feeling of being part of the larger literary scene.

And what of the event with the three librarians? Afterwards we locked the doors, opened a bottle and had a fine old time talking for hours about what we were reading, which, after all, is what the festival experience is all about.